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Can START Be Stopped?

In acronym-awed Washington, stirring up the alphabet soup is a serious matter. Thus it has become a critical concern in the capital that White House officials have begun referring to certain ongoing negotiations with the Soviet Union not as a continuation of SALT (which stands for Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) but as START (for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks).

SALT was first coined as an acronym in 1968 by State Department Official Robert Martin. Senior officials at State thought it a bit too cute, but the then-trendy CIA and the media picked it up, and the designation stuck. At his first press conference in January, however, President Reagan noted that "SALT means Strategic Arms Limitation, but... we should start negotiating on the basis of trying to effect an actual reduction." So National Security Adviser Richard Allen started START. Eugene Rostow, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA; which rhymes roughly with actor, at least in Boston), used the new term at his Senate confirmation hearings and helped give it currency.

Is START a starter? No one knows for sure. Officials at the Department of State—abbreviated as DOS, but *never* called "Doss"—have taken another firm stand against creeping cuteness. They say it will take an official order for them to start saying START. The CIA is keeping its view secret. Nor is there a consensus at Rostow's ACDA, which has a problem of its own—Congress is planning to drop "Disarmament" from its title; so a way must be found to pronounce ACA ("Assa" does not seem right) or have it revert to being simply a set of initials. All of which should be resolved before future high-level arms talks with the Soviets are STARTed.